

Irish Security Soundings

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The Amplification of Violence by Dissident Republicans

Context

On 19 Jan. 2019, shortly after 8pm, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) exploded on Bishop Street, Derry, Northern Ireland. A call was reportedly received warning of the car bomb to the Samaritans in the UK. By the time the information had reached the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), a patrol had already come across the suspicious vehicle and had begun clearing the area before detonation occurred. As a result, no one was injured. Days later, the 'New IRA' reportedly claimed responsibility. Weeks later, on 5 March 2019, three suspect packages, deemed to be small but viable, were found at two London airports, Heathrow and London City, and at Waterloo Railway Station. The package sent to Heathrow, was opened, causing it to activate and part of the package burned. The Metropolitan Police said they were treating these as a series of linked incidents. The following day another similar device was found at the University of Glasgow. At least two of these packages had Irish stamps and were thought to have been posted in Ireland. Although many tried to refrain from jumping to conclusions about who could be responsible, a later claim of responsibility, reportedly 'made on behalf of the New IRA' clearly linked the devices to a dissident republican group. The claimant, was said to have indicated that five devices were sent, but at the time of the claim only four devices had been recovered. However, weeks later, on the 22 March, another package was located in an Post office in Limerick. An Garda Siochana reported that this package was identical to packages found in the UK. Interestingly, this MO was previously used by the group in 2014, when similar devices were sent to UK army career offices. While no one was injured in these incidents, things took a turn for the worse in April, when on the 18th, a riot took place in Derry. Reports suggest that the riot was the result of earlier searches of homes for weapons by the PSNI, ahead of Easter Commemorations. During the riot, shots were fired, and a journalist, Lyra McKee, was tragically killed. The PSNI soon after stated that the shooting was being treated as a terrorist incident, and further suggested that the New IRA were most likely responsible. A statement by the group confirmed this.

Comment

Unlike what is being suggested by some analysts, it is difficult to categorically link these incidents to Brexit. The New IRA claim to have been involved in the death of a number of prison officers over the last six years and for other attempted killings and bombings in Northern Ireland, prior to the UK's decision to leave the EU. That said, the uncertainty of Brexit and the risk that a no-deal scenario would result in the re-instatement of a hard border, is likely to be amplifying tensions in Northern Ireland. Brexit may be seen, by such dissident republicans, as an opportunity to exploit, as they are likely to see the re-installation of a hard border as a direct challenge to a united Ireland. In fact, the Sunday Times quoted one member of the group as saying "*it would be remiss of us not to capitalise on the opportunity,*" and that "[Brexit] *put the border on the agenda again*".

While, the death of Lyra McKee and these other incidents clearly show a continued commitment to violence by at least one dissident republican group, it would appear that those willing to use violence for this cause are now in the minority, as evident by the negative reaction to this violence in the immediate aftermath of her death. An emerging narrative after Lyra's death was that her death should not be in vain, as a result many within communities, previously known for staying silent in the

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aftermath of such violence, were quick to condemn it. Nonetheless, just because people do not support the New IRA's violent MO, their disdain for such actions may not be enough to encourage them to provide information and/or evidence to the police. Being perceived as an informer is often viewed worse than being a criminal or terrorist in some communities. The PSNI acknowledge these difficulties, but have urged the public to come forward with information, assuring that any information can be given in the strictest of confidence.

Given the backdrop that Brexit may be providing an environment of uncertainty that is amplifying the narrative and justification for violence by dissident republican groups, the response, at least politically, needs to be measured, to mitigate the risk of heightening tensions. Even in the absence of violence, Brexit provides the ideal environment for the return of nationalistic discourse, both North and South of the border. It is a very sensitive discussion in itself and if not handled correctly could antagonise other groups, such as, dissident unionists. Conflating issues like Brexit and a reunification of the island of Ireland is likely to provide belligerents, on all sides, with the opportunity to exploit old, and existing, tensions and political fault lines for their own gains.

Furthermore, it would be naive to think that the New IRA's activities and subsequent statements and responses would not incite alternative groups, such as dissenting unionists, to respond. Irrespective of security assessments that suggest dissident unionist groups, very active in the criminal realm, are now less equipped to conduct terror attacks. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that such knowledge and skills would not take long to be re-developed, given that their command structures also remain in effect. As a result, there is a clear need for mature discussion and debate. Nonetheless, while this debate is timely in the context of Brexit, one must be very mindful that the potential consequences of such discussions are likely to have significant impact beyond Brexit. For example, in a recent interview with John Mooney, of the Sunday Times, the New IRA reportedly stated "*we fully accept we cannot defeat the British militarily, or even drive them from Ireland, but we will continue to fight for as long as they remain here. The attacks are symbolic. They are propaganda. As long as you have the British in Ireland and the country remains partitioned, there will be an IRA*".

Assessment

We need to look beyond the Brexit debate for motivations, grievances and for possible responses, because we require an alternative approach. The roles of the criminal justice system and rule of law alone, while important, are unlikely to be successful, rather potentially reinforcing feelings of grievance. An approach that aims to better understand why young people, particularly males, are still being attracted to dissident groups and to engage more meaningfully with them. We need to better understand the deep rooted reasons as to why communities still don't feel safe to speak out against such violence. The tragic death of Lyra could provide the opportunity to engage around this.

There is another interesting dimension to this. It seems acceptable to speak about those who join groups like Islamic State, and increasingly, right wing groups in terms of radicalisation, extremism and de-radicalisation, yet, outside academia, we rarely see similar narratives being applied in the Irish context. While acknowledging much of the language around radicalisation and extremism is laden, such a criticism does not negate the need for a broader policy perspective, one which considers the impact of the current political, economic and social environment in Northern Ireland, but also that in the Republic, the UK and across Europe. Such a perspective will help to better inform why people continue to join these groups, what attracts them to such groups, what can be done to try to divert them and to support disengagement for others. A whole of society approach is required, one that will necessitate brave leadership and action, from affected communities, potentially current and former armed groups, right up to the halls of power in Stormont, the Dáil and Westminster.

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